
Book Reviews

Beacham, Richard C. *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. Pp. xii + 306. Notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cb.

Köhne, Eckart, and Cornelia Ewigleben, eds. *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Pp. 160. Illustrated, bibliography, index. \$29.95 pb.

These two noteworthy volumes will sustain the recent interest in Roman spectacles. Overlapping somewhat but different in approach, both demonstrate that Roman spectacles were diverse, popular, and politically charged.

Beacham provides valuable and engaging reading for anyone interested in Roman popular (and political) culture. He uses a narrative framework to provide a “theatrical history” of the development and the social and political importance of spectacles (of the stage, circus and arena, plus processions and pageants) in urban Rome from Pompey and Julius Caesar to Nero. An expert on Roman theater comfortable with literary sources and architecture, he understandably seems more interested in theater (and “political theater”) and pageantry than more physical or violent spectacles.

Beacham’s main arguments—that spectacles were “tangible expressions” of Roman power and ideology, that political rivalries in the Later Republic fostered an escalation of spectacles, that Augustus was profoundly aware of the political capital of shows and of his own political role-playing, that Rome experienced a “stagecraft of state craft”—an “aestheticization” of politics and a “theatricalization” of public life, and that shows were forums for political interactions between emperors and the populace—are well established in scholarship (e.g. Veyne, Zanker, Bartsch, Wiedemann). Commendably, however, Beacham’s impressive synthesis makes such research accessible to a wide audience, with lively and lucid writing and without dense theorization.

After a survey of public entertainments in the Late Republic, the chapters follow the careers of famous Romans: the rivalry of Caesar and Pompey; Augustus’ theatricality as a master of shows—“the great illusionist” who, in his own words, played the “mime of life” well; and the failures (Tiberius), successes (Claudius), and excesses (Caligula) of the Early Principate in terms of popular culture. The last chapter effectively demonstrates how

“the most flamboyantly theatrical” emperor, produced and personally performed in shows to win the approval of the crowds and to alter Rome’s traditional ambivalence about Greek entertainments. Nero’s tour of competitions in the Greek East in A.D. 66-67 is presented not as a travesty but as a genuine and effective act of diplomacy. Nero became popular in Greece and with the masses at Rome, but his alienation of the military sealed his fate. The stage was not mightier than the sword.

Köhne and Ewingleben’s lavishly illustrated work accompanied an exhibition at Hamburg, Speyer and London, and it was co-published and translated from the German by the British Museum. The editors, a curator and a museum director, have produced a visually striking and academically impressive volume that displays the wealth of evidence left from Roman spectacles. The chronological and geographical scope of the collection and volume is as vast as the Roman Empire itself. An eclectic treasure trove, over two hundred pieces from the British Museum and twenty other European museums range from the evocative to the mundane—from tombstones, reliefs and statues to ceramics, lamps and graffiti. Some are familiar and famous, others are alluring and exotic items seldom published or not easily accessible. The illustrations (147 color, 15 b&w, each with a small catalog entry, spread throughout the text) are—forgive me—spectacular. They take one’s breath away, and they breathe life into the ancient phenomena.

Six main chapters detail the activities and settings, the evidence, and the political and cultural prominence and influence of various performances—competitive and violent, cultured and coarse, native and imported. Chapter 1, by Köhne, thoroughly explains the typology of spectacles. Chapters 2-4 on the amphitheater, Greek athletics, and the circus, are by the energetic and insightful experimental archaeologist, M. Junkelmann. His recreations of the ancient equipment and techniques lead to compelling discussions of ancient events, including some striking observations on the cinematic chariot race in Ben Hur. Chapter 5, by W. Stroh, on the Roman theater, and Chapter 6, by Ewingleben, on performers and audiences, offer informative syntheses. There are no notes but a useful bibliography completes the volume.

Attractive to the eye and to the budget, this substantial paperback (large format, double columns, small font) should be widely acquired and appreciated by students and scholars of antiquity.

—DONALD G. KYLE
University of Texas at Arlington